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*Review of Julie Golia, **Newspaper Confessions: A History of Advice Columns in a Pre-Internet Age***

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Reviews

Julie Golia, *Newspaper Confessions: A History of Advice Columns in a Pre-Internet Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021). 219 pp. ISBN 9780197527788

The practice of giving advice in print form has a long, rich history. In Helen Berry's 2003 study, *Gender, Society, and Print Culture in Late-Stuart England: The Cultural World of the Athenian Mercury*, Berry provides us with an account of what is considered to be the first regular advice column in English print, begun in 1690. This study reveals that, even from the first, individuals have sought out public forums in order to expose private details of their lives and to seek sympathy, advice, and a sense of community. Similarly, as other histories of the advice column such as Berry's, Robin Kent's 1987 *Agony: Problem Pages through the Ages*, and David Gudelunas's 2008 *Confidential to America: Newspaper Advice Columns and Sexual Education* have shown, the subjects upon which men and women write in to publications offering such services are, to an extent, perennial. Love, sex, marriage; loneliness, alienation; matters of the heart and head posed as dilemmas, or as ongoing arguments requiring expert adjudication by an impartial third party; these topics are the bread-and-butter of the advice column.

Two hundred years after the *Athenian Mercury's* earliest attempts to advise citizens of seventeenth-century London, and across the Atlantic in turn-of-the-century America, Julie Golia takes a corpus of thirty-one, mass-circulation newspapers, between the years of 1895 and 1940, as the focus of her study: *Newspaper Confessions: A History of Advice Columns in a Pre-Internet Age*. In the introduction to Golia's survey and analysis we are told that this date range is a deliberate choice to examine the period before the 1950s and the careers of Ann Landers and Abigail Van Buren. From the outset, and as her

title suggests, Golia makes links between the advice column and the forums, chat rooms, and social media groups of the internet age. It is her contention that the advice column is the precursor to the 'intimate' yet 'anonymous' spaces created by the internet. Golia sees the advice column as serving some of the same functions as these online forums, providing the authors of various queries the safety of obscuring their identity, whilst supplying an endless stream of titillating voyeurism for the reader.

Newspaper Confessions follows some well-established arguments in its opening chapter, reminding the reader that 'free' or public advice is not an invention of the newspaper or periodical genre. Conduct books and pamphlets precede the rise of the periodical by some margin, but Golia is keen to reemphasise that such publications were largely written by men, for men. In this male model of delivery advice was framed as a transmission of information from 'expert to audience' (p. 9). What is distinct about the transformation of American society at the end of the nineteenth century, as was equally true of British society, is that a new paradigm emerges. As the advice column began to be a popular feature of newly emergent 'women's sections' in newspapers, so advice became 'interactive, [...] flexible in topic and form, and woman-centred' (p. 9). The interests, anxieties and desires of women readers, as reproduced in the pages of these national and regional publications, were a goldmine for newspapers seeking to demonstrate to potential advertisers the possibilities of targeted marketing. One example explored by Golia is a 1931 advert for detergent with a large pull-quote acting as a headline: "broken illusions can

never be mended” says Dorothy Dix’ (p. 51). The implication of the advertisement for ‘Lux’ detergent is that if women wash their lingerie in Lux, this will contribute to the ongoing success of their romantic relationships. As Dorothy Dix (real name Elizabeth Meriwether Gilmer, 1861–1951) was, by this point, a household name, her validation of products like Lux was a serious coup for the manufacturer and an example of early celebrity endorsement deals.

Charting the rapid shift from the male-centred, politically-motivated paper of previous centuries Golia tells us: ‘In 1895, only about half of newspapers published content for women, and when they did, it rarely extended beyond a half-column feature. By the mid-1920s, creative and extensive women’s sections were standard features in most American newspapers.’ (p. 14) The advice columns that began to sprout up in newspapers around the country covered topics such as women’s health, love and marriage, parenting, beauty techniques, religion, politics, courtship and sex, divorce, fashion, women’s employment, cooking, budgeting, loneliness, and depression (p. 15; p. 24). As such, they provide fascinating snapshots into changing cultural expectations across micro periods of historically-analysed time (decades) and across larger periods too.

Marriage was, as perhaps is to be expected, a constant source of debate and sometimes strife, as columnists sought to strike a balance between upholding conservative and normative ideals of behaviour whilst not wishing to alienate readers whose problems often tested such norms and conventional values. In the West, the twentieth century more generally had to grapple with the move away from marriage as a ‘largely economic transaction shaped by duty and hierarchy’ towards an understanding that it should be ‘companionate’, providing ‘total emotional satisfaction’ (p. 33). This created unrealistic expectations amongst readers who wrote to columnists expressing bitterness and disappointment when their marriages

did not live up to romanticized images presented to them by novels and motion pictures. More often than not, as Golia’s case studies demonstrate, columnists placed blame back onto women for these unrealistic expectations, constructing themselves as an authority on such matters, and as proto-marriage counsellors (another profession that would emerge in light of such societal changes, in the late 1920s).

Chapter 3 draws a line from the sensational yellow-journalism tactics of figures like Nellie Bly with her ‘willingness to market her personality and her physical appearance’ (p. 58), to the self-promotion of the advice columnist who would share carefully selected personal details, and examples from their private lives, in order to garner respect and to demonstrate trustworthiness to their audience. Golia briefly considers the rise of ‘sob sister’ journalists who covered urban crime stories from a sympathetic and highly emotional point of view as this was columnist Dorothy Dix’s journalistic background. The suggestion here is that from stunt-reporting tactics such as those famously used by Bly in her exposé of an asylum, to the overblown rhetoric of the sob sister commenting on a notorious murder trial, to the ‘advice columnists [who] peddled in emotions and feelings’ (p. 60) there is a more substantial lineage to be established than the mere fact that Dix acted as both sob sister and agony aunt. Whilst it is the case that each of these figures of modern journalism elicited emotional engagement from their readers, Golia might have more emphatically made a case for the revolutionary power of these types of ‘soft news’ as they were referred to (p. 60). If Golia does see the stunt journalism that sought to force reform of institutions such as hospitals, sweatshops, factories, and workhouses as part of a modernising dynamism that could only be the work of a female hand, then more could have been done to insist upon this intriguing suggestion.

Chapter four, dedicated to the enigmatic Vauleda Hill Strodder, or Princess Mysteria, provides an engaging account of Strodder's column, 'Advice to the Wise and Otherwise', published in the *Chicago Defender* from 1921–1930. In this chapter, Golia argues convincingly that in Princess Mysteria, we have an early example of an intersectional feminist, whose mission it was to empower black women to see themselves as 'autonomous citizens, and human beings before they were wives, mothers, and women' (p. 114).

Recounting some of the letters sent to various advice columnists, from the alienated modern masses experiencing a 'loneliness epidemic' in the 1920s, Golia draws our attention to an amusing encounter: a citizen by the pen name 'Hopeless' writes of their disillusionment and a proclivity for the works of Darwin, Ingersoll, and Voltaire. Nancy Brown, columnist of 'Experience' for the *Detroit News*, suggests that 'Hopeless' need only try to have a "good time" instead of wallowing in her gloom, to try wearing pretty clothes, and most importantly, to read 'light novels' (p. 123) instead of those that seemed to confirm her sense of existential ennui. Whilst this advice might seem somewhat flippant to a modern reader, in the final chapter of *Newspaper Confessions* Golia demonstrates just how authoritative and well-regarded an advice columnist could be. The reader is informed that by 1930 Brown's column had over 100 frequent contributors and many more of an irregular nature. This chapter explores the vital service many advice columnists performed within their local, regional, and

sometimes national communities. Golia relates that in the case of Brown's loyal readership this translated to in-person gatherings numbering 30,000, 50,000, and finally over 100,000 at a Sunrise Vigil in 1940. These remarkable gatherings remain a powerful testament to the strength of feeling advice columns could command in their heyday.

Golia closes her book by returning to the argument that the advice column is a 'direct precursor' (p. 145) of the online forum, chat room, blog, and social media group. Accordingly, columns like Nancy Brown's 'Experience' '[help] to explain how Americans came to value and use [...] virtual sites' (p. 145). I found this the least compelling argument of *Newspaper Confessions*. Rather where Golia really succeeds is in weaving together well-written accounts of her case-studies with astute observations about how the advice column and other forms of 'soft news' transformed the make-up of the twentieth-century newspaper, the legacy of which we still very much see today in both online and print media. This book serves as an effective historical record of an area of journalism that may not be 'high status' in the way that the war reporter or undercover journalist might be considered, but through careful and detailed accounts of her evidence-base, Golia presents us with a wealth of testimony to the important role the advice column played in the twentieth century, providing insight into why it remains an enduring part of periodical journalism today.

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